

Keys to

Success

By Judy Holmes

Chancellor

Shaw

shares his

insights on

what it takes

to lead a

university

today

Syracuse University Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw drew on more than two decades of experience as a leader in higher education to write *The Successful President: "BuzzWords" on Leadership*. "I don't believe it is possible to write a prescription for leadership," he writes in the preface. "The best I can offer—or any student of the subject can offer—are insights and guidelines to help make the process of leading more effective and more rewarding."

The Chancellor discussed his views on leadership with *Syracuse University Magazine*. The following excerpts are from that conversation.

Q: Your book is based on leadership in higher education. How applicable do you believe it is to other leadership settings?

Shaw: I intentionally mention in the foreword that I've really only worked as a leader in higher education, and that I didn't feel I could presume to know what is needed in other areas. But I think the attributes of leadership are the same, regardless of the institution.

Q: How does your leadership role at Syracuse University work within the broader community?

Shaw: The most important part of my role is that I am the leader of this University. Let's start with that and go back to the second chapter of the book, where leadership is defined. From leadership comes a vision. That is not often the leader's vision, rather it is a vision that reflects the ideas of a lot of people and an understanding of the values of an institution. Leadership involves envisioning what an institution should be like, communicating that vision, and doing the things that are needed to make it possible for the vision to be carried out. That is my job as the leader of Syracuse University.

My job in the community entails being both the leader of this University and a citizen of this community. My job as the leader of this University is to make sure that the things we do help make the community better, because that is in our best interests. My job as a citizen is to do things that help to make the community better, because that is a responsibility we all have. I'm very active in community economic development. Mrs. Shaw and I are involved with a number of agencies and boards within the community. In addition, we have been very active in getting thousands of our students involved in community service activities, which is a very important part of our mission.

Illustration By Marty Blake

Q: How do leaders recognize when an institution's vision and mission need to be revised, or should they ever be revised?

Shaw: First let's talk about when they can be revised. Social institutions generally don't change if they don't have to, even in the most responsive and innovative environments. The business sector tends to change more readily because of competition. Likewise, private universities are far more responsive to change than public ones. There are very few examples of public universities going out of business. There are, however, examples of private institutions that have either disappeared or have faced serious difficulties as a result of not being responsive to change.

The timing for change is often defined by external conditions. It is the leader's job to figure out a way to make change happen. Sometimes it involves taking a new path and having a new vision. Sometimes it requires refinement, and sometimes it requires going back to the basics of what the institution is about. When I arrived at SU, I was careful about understanding what our institutional values were. I spent a lot of time listening to people. From that I identified five values (quality, caring, innovation, diversity, service) that people could relate to and say, "Yes, that's us."

Then came the question of articulating SU's vision of being a leading student-centered research university. Not everyone agreed with that vision. But SU has both a history of, and strong pockets of, very student-centered programs. But the vision had to be stated forcefully. While continuing our emphasis on research, we needed to be more responsive to our students, to their learning environment, and to their out-of-class environment.

Q: What do you believe is the single most important personality trait for leaders?

Shaw: There is no single characteristic. There are at least three, maybe four, important characteristics. You must have physical stamina to hold up under the rigors of a busy schedule. You must have a level of intelligence commensurate to the challenge, a degree of emotional security to deal with the challenges, and, finally, you need leadership skills.

Of those characteristics, emotional security is perhaps most important. If you don't have emotional security, you create problems for yourself and others.

Q: What are the three things that you like best about your job as Chancellor?

Shaw: I think I make a difference. I enjoy the complexity of this kind of institution, where there are many stresses and strains, and conflicting and supporting needs. I enjoy figuring out ways to make it all work. Finally, I think I probably do this better than I would do most other things.

Q: What is the single most difficult decision you have had to make at Syracuse University?

Shaw: Let's distinguish between decisions and actions. The single most difficult action is always letting people go and doing it in a way that preserves their sense of dignity and respect, while acknowledging that the University comes first. It's not easy.

The most difficult decision had to be restructuring—not whether we should or should not, that was determined by external conditions. But rather, exactly what to do. It was a complex decision with both successes and failures.

There is a paradox here. Some decisions are easy to make and are difficult to carry out—for example, a personnel change. Some decisions are easy to carry out, but are difficult to make.

Q: In the book, you describe the multiple roles leaders play and the different constituencies they face daily. How do you present a unified message?

Shaw: You try to be yourself, be genuine, and accept the fact that you are going to turn a few people off. You should not change for the constituents you are working with, because pretty soon you don't remember who you are.

Q: If John Robert Greene writes another book about SU, *The Continuing Legacy: The Shaw Years*, what would you like him to say about your legacy?

Shaw: First of all, he looks to be my age. My grandfather was a manager of a factory until he

was 82; my father just died at age 98; so Greene may be too old to write my history. But let's say that he is able to hang on long enough. I would like him to be able to say that I made a difference, and that Syracuse University is better because I was here.

